Fowl Feathered Review

№ 181

Issue № *181: Lost My Marbles, Found a Unicorn. Now What?*

Fowl Feathered Review is a quarterly, a disordered artifact of the human impulse to categorize and consume the ephemeral. Produced by the Springwound Mammoth Pancake Coalition–an entity distinct from its waffle-centric counterpart–it is birthed under the Fowlpox Press imprint. Virgil Kay, its editor, presides over this enterprise from a paper canoe adrift on the Passagassawakeag, a river of dubious depth and even more dubious inhabitants. Surrounded by featherheads and their aquatic card games, Kay's reign is absolute, his word the final arbiter in the transformation of boastful souls into doormats. Layout and visual conceits are the province of Cookie Granola, while melodrama and histrionics fall under the purview of Childe Harold. Silent Bill, in his characteristically taciturn manner, provides necessary pauses. The review's structural integrity, or lack thereof, is the domain of Unkie Bob, whose talents extend to the mitigation of typographical errors and the prevention of electrical conflagrations. Everett Enótita serves as Kay's indispensable amanuensis, and the Ecum Secum Literary Brain Trust, in a gesture of dubious beneficence, offers nominal financial support. Printed upon the verdant expanse of Bald Porcupine Island, and laced with the enigmatic Kraa, a bioengineered culinary enigma, the Fowl Feathered Review remains a testament to human ingenuity, or perhaps merely a symptom of cultural decline. ISSN: 1929-7238.

"I am an observer of life, a non-participant who takes no sides. I am in the regimented society, but not of it."

--Moondog, The Viking of 6th Avenue

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Submissions

Fowlpox Press: A Submission Guide for the Determined (or Deluded) To the Aspiring Artist (or Sandwich Enthusiast):

1. **Craft** (or **Culinary Construct**): 2-227 poems, a numerical range that hints at both ambition and a troubling lack of self-editing, may find their way to our digital doorstep (fowlpoxpress@mail2poet.com). Alternatively, for the visually inclined, paintings numbered 2-953 (a prolific career, or perhaps a basement overflowing with forgotten canvases?) are welcome. We are also, inexplicably, open to submissions of twelve-inch sandwiches.
2. **The Gatekeeper:** Address your offerings to Virgil Kay, Editor. In posession of remarkably discerning taste, or so he believes, Virgil is a rooster of some renown, a creature of instinct and inexplicable confidence. His title, "China Wok Habitue," suggests a broader palate than one might expect from a bird, though it's more likely a testament to the local takeout joint's generous portions. (**Please note:** Include a bio, a desperate plea for recognition that will likely join the unread masses in the digital purgatory of our slush pile.)
3. **Format:** Poems, those valiant attempts at capturing the human experience in meter and rhyme, should be attached in a Word document or PDF. Paintings, windows into your soul (or a weekend spent with Bob Ross reruns), must be submitted in JPEG, TIFF, or a format our aging technology can comprehend. Jokes, if they exist, should be delivered in MP3 format. We are, alas, not equipped to handle the nuanced art of the live performance. Sandwiches, a curious offering in the realm of artistic expression, require clear plastic wrapping and a small packet of Kewpie Mayonnaise. (**Pro-tip:** The Kewpie packaging is, undeniably, a work of art in its own right, and we encourage you to admire it before consumption.)
4. **The Cycle Continues:** We exist in a perpetual state of acceptance and rejection. A Sisyphean task, some might say. We receive submissions 365 days a year, a testament to the relentless hope, or perhaps blissful ignorance, of aspiring artists. However, with a heavy heart (and a full crop), we must inform you that rejections also occur 365 days a year.
5. **The Sandwiches:** Ah, the sandwiches. These, unlike your artistic endeavors, find a permanent home within our editorial sanctum. Virgil, in his infinite wisdom, has determined that a diet rich in carbohydrates is essential for maintaining his regal demeanor.
6. **Leap Year Follies:** Leap years, those extra days gifted by the whims of the calendar, offer no reprieve. Aspiring poets, it seems, are undeterred by such temporal anomalies. You are, however, cordially invited to "take a flying leap" during these additional 24 hours.

Please proceed with caution. Artistic aspirations are a delicate dance, and the path to publication is littered with the fallen hopes of countless dreamers. But hey, maybe your sandwich is killer. Just remember, Kewpie or bust.

Fowl Feathered Review | Poets & Writers (pw.org)

"Non ignora mali, miseris succurrere disco."

— Virgil, The Aeneid

BOGO BOFFO

By Frank O. Norelco

The teal Saturn, a veritable tumbril of tarnished terrestrial trajectories, languished in the Orono gloaming, its paint peeling like pronouncements from a forgotten politico. Within its dusty confines, a phantasmagoria of forgotten flotsam – chipped teacups whispering tales of tepid tannins and tart tittle-tattle, a sequined collar gleaming with the spectral effulgence of a bygone discotheque, and oversized shoes splayed like the discarded parentheses of a particularly clumsy existential query – bore silent witness to the digital delirium unfolding nearby.

In the adjacent, quasi-lunar module of Gary's teardrop camper, the laptop screen pulsed with the flickering effluvium of Jerry Lewis, a veritable geyser of gauche gestures and gravitational gaffes. On this pixelated proscenium, Lewis would embark upon yet another ill-advised perambulation across a suspiciously lubricated linoleum expanse, his appendages akimbo in a ballet of impending disaster. "**Ах, какая досада! Падаю, как метеор!**" (Ah, what a nuisance! I'm falling like a meteor!) the Russian subtitles would intone with a Chekhovian sigh. He would then, with the resilience of a wind-up toy imbued with pure, unadulterated schlemiel, attempt a semblance of upright locomotion, only to encounter an unseen vectorial anomaly, resulting in yet another spectacular splay. "**Сизифов труд, ей-богу!**" (The labor of Sisyphus, by God!) This cyclical descent into comedic catastrophe, a veritable Möbius strip of misfortune, played out for Gary's impassive scrutiny, a ritual as familiar as the Maine sunrise.

Earlier, amidst the stark, fluorescent chiaroscuro of the Orono IGA, Gary, a veritable automaton of aisle adherence, navigated the comestible catacombs with a precision that bordered on the pathological. He would scan a tin of anchovies, the beep a tiny, tinny pronouncement in the monotonous liturgy of retail. The strident signage – "2 FOR $5 –

SELECT CEREALS!" and "BOGO FREE – ICED TEA!" – seemed like desperate semaphore in a sea of consumer ennui. Yet, even as he aligned a phalanx of pickled beets with military precision, the spectral image of Jerry Lewis's perpetual plummeting flickered in his cerebral cortex, a discordant note in the symphony of the mundane. He'd envision reaching for a jar of capers, only to find his lower extremities engaged in an impromptu soft-shoe, culminating in a cascade of glass and brine, a veritable Jackson Pollock of preserved vegetables.

His online perusals offered a different, yet equally predictable, aesthetic: the recurring rococo flourishes of Royal Albert, the unwavering Euclidean elegance of Mid-Century modernism, the stubbornly persistent palimpsest of history embedded within Victorian Flow Blue. The Flow Blue plate, a recurring chimera unearthed from the hushed hinterlands of forgotten bric-a-brac, held a silent, inscrutable narrative.

Back in the camper, the delicate Limoges porcelain, each pastoral vignette a repeated trope of bucolic bliss, joined his meticulously cataloged collection. He unwrapped them with the solemnity of a curator handling fragments of the Rosetta Stone.

"Gary? You in there, dear?" Martha's vocalization, a familiar sonic signature in his otherwise hermetic existence, heralded her arrival, bearing the predictable payload of her reliably overcooked comestible conglomerate.

He cast a sidelong glance at the laptop screen, where Jerry Lewis was, with unwavering predictability, encountering yet another gravitational hiccup, the Russian subtitles offering their laconic commentary: "**Квантовая неопределенность в действии.**" (Quantum uncertainty in action.) "Hi, Mom. Just...observing the human condition."

Her gaze drifted towards the luminous rectangle. "That...gentleman? Still...experiencing terrestrial friction?" A familiar query, tinged with a gentle, almost anthropological curiosity.

Later, at the flea market, the minimalist clown presented his fragile wares. A woman, her gaze sharp with the predatory gleam of the discerning collector, approached his makeshift emporium. Gary, with the studied grace of a malfunctioning android, attempted to present a delicate Limoges plate. His white-gloved digits, however, seemed to operate under a different set of physical laws. They spasmed. The plate executed a precarious pirouette. It then, with the inevitability of a poorly conceived tragicomedy, embarked upon a rapid descent, culminating in a sharp, ceramic staccato against the unforgiving asphalt.

Gary's painted visage remained an impassive mask. He bent with the deliberate slowness of a malfunctioning hydraulic system, gathering the shards with an air of detached scientific inquiry. He presented the fragmented remains to the startled woman. "Behold," he intoned, his voice a monotone drone, "a study in entropy. Yours for...sentimental value."

Another customer, her eyes alight with acquisitive fervor, expressed interest in a Flow Blue saucer. Gary, exhibiting the cautious movements of a bomb disposal expert, extended it with excruciating care. But as the woman reached, a rogue gust of Orono zephyr – a veritable poltergeist of the picnic blanket – seized a nearby doily. The doily, in its chaotic ballet, snagged the saucer, sending it aloft in a brief, improbable avian imitation before its abrupt, earthbound denouement.

Gary surveyed the ceramic detritus with an air of philosophical resignation. He knelt, collecting the larger fragments with the solemnity of an archaeologist unearthing pottery shards from a long-lost civilization. He offered them to the now-bemused customer. "Consider it," he stated flatly, "a...pre-emptive strike against dust. Less to clean."

A third potential patron fixed her gaze upon a Limoges platter. Gary, his movements now bordering on the catatonic, presented it with the reverence one might accord a highly unstable isotope. But as he extended it, his oversized clown footwear, those veritable banana peels of the sartorial realm, betrayed him. He executed an involuntary lurch, his arms windmilling in a silent, terrestrial approximation of Lewis's on-screen

flailing. The platter, liberated from his grasp, performed a graceful arc before its percussive reunion with terra firma.

Gary remained motionless for a beat, his painted smile a study in existential detachment. He slowly knelt, the silence broken only by the mournful susurrus of the Maine wind. He picked up a particularly large shard. "A...memento mori," he declared to the retreating figure. "Of dreams...shattered."

Between the endless, digitally replayed tumbles of Jerry Lewis, each accompanied by a droll Russian commentary on the inherent precariousness of bipedalism, and Gary's increasingly catastrophic encounters with the delicate yet stubbornly earthbound nature of antique porcelain, the Orono flea market became a stage for a uniquely Beckettian farce. The silent clown, amidst the accumulating debris of broken beauty, stood as a poignant symbol of the universe's inherent indifference to human endeavor, his painted smile a brave, if ultimately futile, defiance against the relentless forces of entropy and slapstick.

WHAT I REALLY NEED IN MY LIFE IS A TAXIDERMIZED DUCK DRONING ON IN VOCAL FRY ABOUT VEGAN COLLAGEN LIP MASKS—A SUPER SILKY DURAG FOR TWO

By Justice Dior Holden

Alright, gather 'round, you seekers of the slightly skewed, you connoisseurs of the cosmic kerfuffle! Your humble narrator, a mere cosmic bellhop on this grand, bewildering hotel of existence, has got a little something here in this rumpled paper sack – a brown paper bag, mind you, unassuming as a tax return, but oh, what treasures it holds! You think it's last night's falafel? A stray sock from the laundry of lost souls? Nuh-uh, my friends. This here bag, it breathes, it pulses, it's got the whole darn tragicomedy of a Tuesday afternoon in Newark tucked inside. You wanna peek? You sure? Alright, hold your breath, cross your fingers, and here... we... GO!

(The narrator upends the bag, and out he spills, not with a thud, but with a viscous *glug,* already calf-deep in a sanguine tide that begins to stain the metaphorical linoleum, our boy Andrew Helm. He's sporting a pair of fisherman's waders that have seen better epochs, or perhaps, are grimly anticipating worse. And with him, cascading from the bag's inverted maw, the rain...)

The rain—oh, that incessant, Proustian rain!—fell not as mere precipitation but as a palimpsest of memory, each droplet containing the reflection of a thousand forgotten afternoons. It descended like the grey curtain separating acts in the cosmic theater of Newark, where time folded upon itself in labyrinthine recursion, falling, had fallen, would forever fall, a perpetual baptism of industrial concrete, now tinged faintly pink as it mingled with the slowly rising tide around Andrew's boots.

Andrew Helm (was it truly Andrew? Or merely the idea of Andrew projected upon the collective unconscious of Desk 12, now with a wing nut for a head that hadn't quite manifested but was buzzing in the psychic ether?) navigated the semiotic maze of fluorescent lighting, his nose—that fleshy bibliotheca of sensory perception—twitching with the precision of a medieval manuscript illuminator. The crimson fluid, his own internal Mississippi breaking its levees, crept up the walls inch by bloody inch. The tampons he sought were not mere cotton cylinders but existential plugs for the hemorrhaging of meaning that had begun, unbidden, in the liminal space between his sinuses and the infinite, a leakage now made spectacularly, gruesomely external.

"Got any?" he inquired of Carol, his voice a hollow croak amplified by the echo from the bottom of his soul, his waders sloshing with each hesitant step towards her desk, which seemed to float like a small, Formica-topped island. Her perfume emanated not scent but narrative, a complex bouquet of metafictional possibility with notes of optimism and corporate despair.

Carol, bless her cotton socks (those humble foot vestments that had witnessed the rise and fall of quarterly projections, and were now, one presumed, getting a tad damp from the under-desk deluge), regarded Andrew with an expression that was one part HR manual, two parts Hieronymus Bosch.

"Well now, look what the metaphysical cat dragged in, lookin' like a drowned philosopher who's misplaced his footnotes and decided to redecorate with his very essence! Rough day, or did the universe just serve you a subpoena for crimes against coherence, sweet cheeks?" she ventured, her question hanging in the air like an unresolved chord in a Schoenbergian composition, as she offered the box with the

solemn reverence of a priest presenting a sacred relic. The box, thankfully, was still dry on her desk.

"Rough... dimensionality, Carol, my angel of the water cooler, my sibyl of the supply closet!" Andrew mumbled, his words bubbling up like swamp gas from a peat bog of pure Dostoevskian despair. "The very fabric of 'is' is fraying, and your humble correspondent is but a loose thread, caught in the loom of the ludicrous, wading through the primordial soup of his own unmaking! These ain't just tampons, doll face, they're alabaster arks for a psychic Noah, bobbing on the rising tide of my own internal... well, let's just call it 'viscera of the void.'"

He accepted the offering, the cardboard box a tiny raft in his trembling hands. The tampons, those humble artifacts of feminine necessity, transformed in his trembling hands to become vessels of transcendence, cotton ships sailing the crimson seas of his existential crisis, which now lapped at his knees.

The office hummed with the low thrum of data entry and suppressed ambition, a Borgesian library of unwritten novels disguised as expense reports, its denizens stoically ignoring the encroaching claret tide, perhaps assuming it was a new motivational tactic from corporate. Ms. Petrov summoned him—not through mere electronic communication but through a ripple in the fabric of corporate hierarchy, a psychic tug on the line of his rapidly dissolving sanity—to discuss the Illinois account, that geographical construct of disappointing sales figures and unmet potential.

He sloshed his way to her office, the viscous sea now at his waist, each step a gurgling protest from the saturated carpet, the fluorescent lights above casting wobbly, blood-red reflections. In her office (was it an office? Or a non-place, an architectural manifestation of power relationships, now a maroon lagoon?), Andrew extracted a blood-bloomed tampon from his nostril with the ceremonial gravity of a medieval knight drawing his sword. The blood—that primordial ink—spoke volumes that no quarterly report could articulate, and it dripped, adding its quota to the room's new, gory ambience.

When consciousness returned (had it ever truly departed, or just taken a smoke break in the alleyway of awareness?), his head had been replaced by a colossal wing nut, gleaming chrome in the harsh office light, its metallic coolness a strange counterpoint to the warm, sticky fluid he was immersed in. This metamorphosis, worthy of Kafka yet tinged with the ironic detachment of postmodernity, went unremarked by Petrov, who, perched on her chair like a cormorant on a rock, continued filing her nails with stoic acceptance of the absurd, perhaps assuming the wing nut was a new corporate hat.

"Helm, you hepcat, you seem to be... redecorating," she observed, her voice as dry as a martini in the desert. "The crimson tide is chic, very *avant-garde,* but does it jive with the Q3 projections for Illinois, that desolate steppe land of stagnant sales? And that headpiece – bold. Does it come with its own torque wrench, or is that extra? Spill the skinny, before your noggin-bolt rusts and this whole office becomes a Jackson Pollock tribute band."

Meanwhile, as Andrew paddled with his hands to keep his wing nut above the sanguinary surface, in the warehouse (that cathedral of commerce, that reliquary of retail, now a veritable Red Sea parting for no Moses), Beatrice the aardwolf, bless her furry, stoic heart, was on a small island of pallets, performing the miracle of birth amidst pallets of industrial-strength floor wax. Old Man Tiberius, a Charon of the night shift, his own waders suspiciously ready by the loading dock, discovered her as he poled a makeshift raft (an upturned office desk) through the viscous flood. Recognizing the market potential of wonder, or perhaps just the sheer weirdness of it all, he photographed the first tiny pup—a pink manifestation of possibility with disproportionately large claws.

"Well, I'll be," he muttered, his voice a gravelly blend of astonishment and resignation, like a bluesman confronting the apocalypse with a half-empty bottle of bourbon. "Kid, you picked a terrible time to punch your ticket into this sideshow. Looks like the whole goshdarn shebang is goin' down the cosmic drain, but here you are, fresh as a daisy in a slaughterhouse."

His words echoed through the cavernous space like a footnote in an Eco novel, simultaneously explanatory and obscure, as Andrew Helm, wing nut glinting, dog-paddled towards the sound, drawn by an instinct older than quarterly reports.

The internet (that collective unconscious, that library of Babel rendered in pixels, somehow still functioning despite the analog Armageddon in Newark) predictably lost its mind, orders flooding in like citations in an academic text, each one referencing a reality that existed only in potential, for aardwolf pups, for meaning, for a dry pair of socks.

Dale, the rogue sales associate, careened down the New Jersey Turnpike in his company-issued minivan, which by some miracle of narrative convenience was amphibious, its tires spinning valiantly against the current of Andrew's outflowing essence that had somehow reached the highway. Twenty boxes of "Shine-O-Matic" rattled in rhythmic counterpoint to his zealous monologue, a sermon on the mount delivered from a floating Econoline.

"These floors," he proclaimed to an unseen interlocutor, possibly a very confused seagull perched on his side mirror, "are begging for transformation! They cry out from the depths of their dullness, 'Deliver us, Dale, from the quotidian scuff marks of despair!' And I, Dale, humble apostle of the immaculate sheen, I shall not fail them!" His crusade against dullness, his jihad of shine, propelled him toward Zenith Fitness with the inevitability of a narrative reaching its climax, or at least a very damp denouement.

Worthington, minimalist emperor of un-waxed domains, somewhere dry and oblivious, threatened impossibilities with the conviction of a character who believes himself the protagonist: "I'll polish every floor with a toothbrush while wearing a sandpaper tutu! I will achieve a shine so profound it reflects the sins of the previous owner!" he thundered into a void, blissfully unaware of the rising, ruddy tide.

Have you heard any good obituaries lately, dear reader? Those miniature biographies that compress a life into column inches, distilling existence to its essence? For Andrew Helm, or what was left of him beneath the chrome, existed now mostly in this fluid

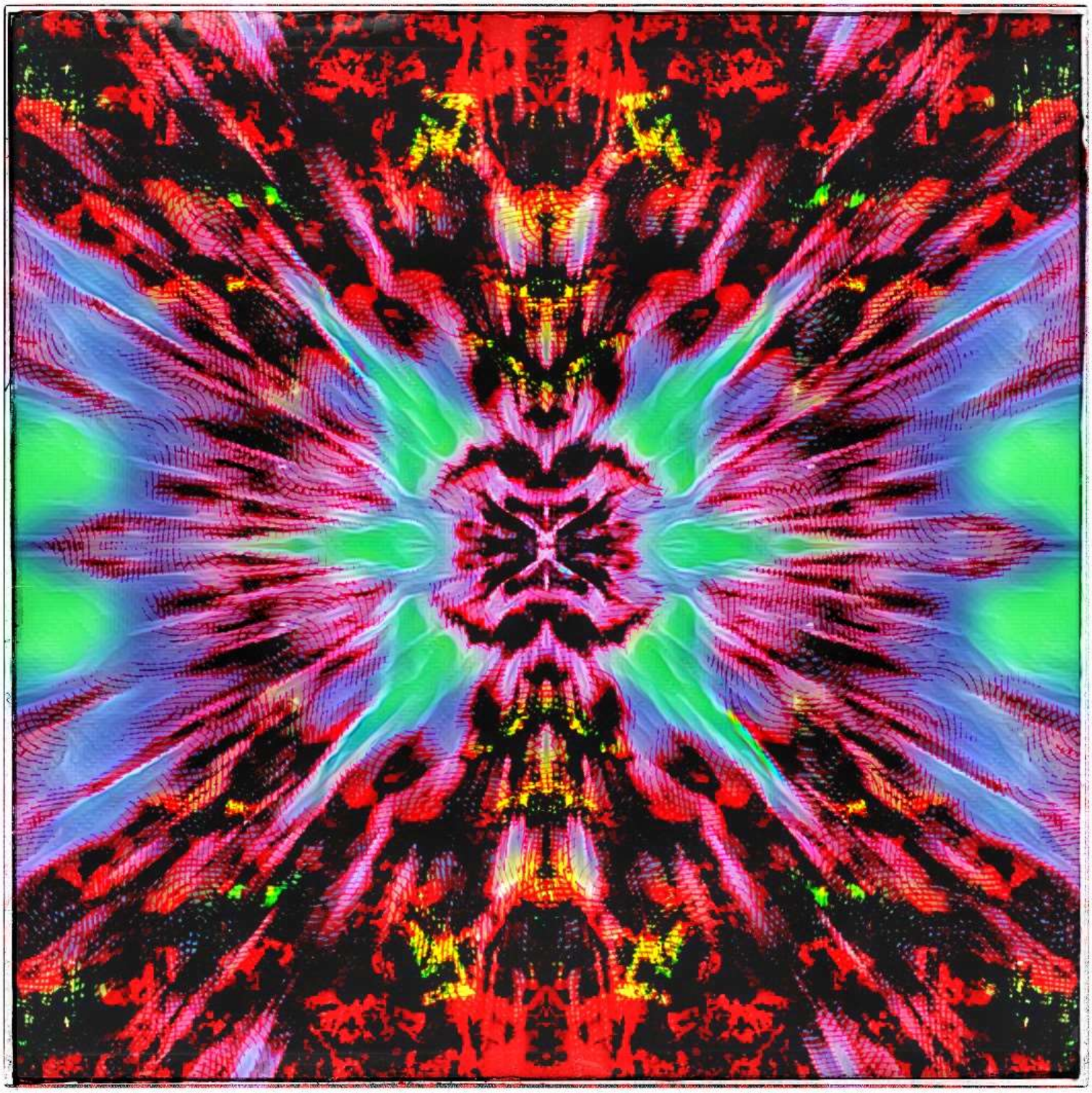
memory, his consciousness spread against the sky like butter on cosmic toast, his wing nut head a constellation in the firmament of corporate absurdity, winking down as he finally reached the pallet-island. He is everywhere and nowhere, his essence diffused through the narrative like perfume through an office, or, more accurately, like his own lifeblood through the tri-state area, present only in the lingering sense that something profound and ridiculous has occurred.

He found a surprisingly buoyant, albeit empty, shipping crate – a makeshift dinghy. Beatrice, with a weary sigh that spoke of ancient mammalian wisdom, nudged one pup towards him with her snout. The pup, Carl, let out a tiny, defiant squeak. Andrew, wing nut bobbing, gently scooped up the pink manifestation of possibility.

The aardwolf pups, those tiny pink manifestations of possibility, Carl now nestled precariously in Andrew's lap, continue to grow in the interstices of the story, their existence both literal and metaphorical, a reminder that even in the most sterile corporate environment, even when said environment is drowning in the bodily fluids of its own existential crises, life finds a way to assert its messy, unpredictable glory.

And somewhere, in the heart of it all, a silky durag for two, perhaps snagged on a floating stapler, awaited its moment of significance, patient as a sentence in a novel waiting to be read, its meaning dependent not on its existence but on its perception, a sartorial Schrödinger's cat both meaningful and meaningless until observed by a consciousness capable of interpretation. Andrew spotted it, plucked it from the crimson tide, and with a moment of fumbling, managed to tie it, rather jauntily, around Carl's tiny, fuzzy head.

With a final, heroic heave, Andrew Helm pushed off from the pallet island, his crate-dinghy surprisingly seaworthy, paddling with a piece of broken shelving towards the loading dock doors, which now opened onto a vast, vermelho vista. The rain, the grey curtain, continued to fall, streaking the windows, but outside, the world was awash. As he and Carl the Aardwolf Pup floated out from the warehouse, leaving the submerged landscape of his former life behind, a blood-red moon, swollen and heavy as a Dostoevskian sigh, began its ascent over the rippling, sanguine sea. The air smelled of iron, and old paper, and the faintest, freshest scent of aardwolf. The rain still fell.



Discarded Dream № 53113

By Shyster Fortissimo

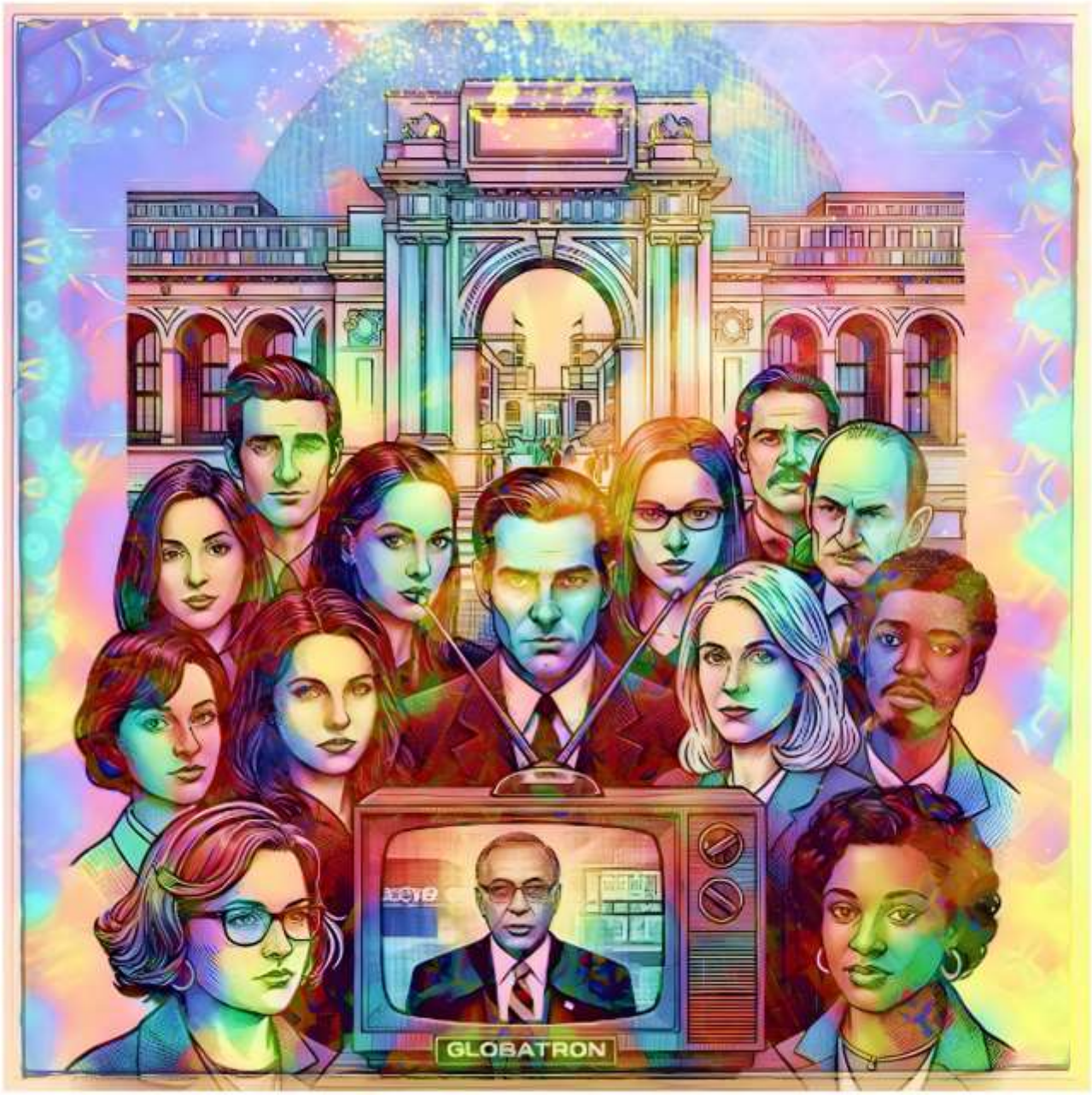
Laugh on the inside, a brittle sound bouncing off the calcium deposits in the skull's attic, and cry on an impenetrable surface, yes, that granite slab of municipal indifference, the one smeared with pigeon guano and the ghost of yesterday's rain. Texture matters here, doesn't it? Like the rough grain of a woodcut from '59, splintering just so, revealing the void beneath. It's the refusal to be pretty, darling, the anti-compromise.

Are you up to sitting down? The chairs here are metaphorical, upholstered in the forgotten manifestos of failed coups. But if you are, adjust the worn felt, notice the coffee stain shaped like Slovakia. Because I'd like to seize this opportunity – you see it? shimmering like a cheap sequin dropped by a street performer near Wenceslas Square – and shake it upside down by its ankles. Yes, just like that, watch the lint fall out, the loose change of half-formed intentions, the crumpled ticket stubs to futures that never screened. It's the gesture that counts, the desperate flailing against the solid unyielding surface.

This reminds me, you know, in the way a tangential thought clings like a burr to the sleeve of memory, of when your mother – poor dear – was under house arrest. Not the dramatic kind, mind you, no barricades, just a polite note slipped under the door, a quiet dampening of possibility. Havel would have understood the exquisite absurdity of it, the pressure of the non-event. And reduced, she was, wasn't she? To selling luxury watches. Luxury. On Etsy. The sheer, grinding materiality of it, the collision of epochs and perceived value. A Rolex amongst macrame plant hangers and beeswax

candles. It's a Bohumil Hrabal detail, really, finding the profound or perhaps just the profoundly odd in the mundane detritus of a life circumscribed, the everyday struggle rendered epic through the sheer, cataloged strangeness of its components.

She's a good person. Yes, stamp that on the record. Authenticity. She means well. She navigates the treacherous waters of modern commerce and conscience. She buys all her organics. Every single kale leaf, every improbably perfect bell pepper. Factory direct. The very words snag on the tongue, don't they? Like Jiří Kolář tearing apart a newspaper headline and reassembling it to reveal the lie embedded in the syntax. Factory direct organics. It's a semiotic collapse, isn't it? The sterile, efficient conveyor belt delivering the dirt-under-the-fingernails promise of the natural. The existential weight of wanting to do good, but being trapped in a system where even virtue is mass-produced, stamped and shipped from some anonymous shed. It makes you want to laugh, doesn't it? On the inside. Where the echoes of discarded dreams, numbered and filed away, rattle like loose cogs in a malfunctioning luxury watch sold cheap, online, under subtle duress. Just waiting for someone to sit down.


GLOBATRON

The Comfort Inn Archipelago: A Neuro-Spicy Doubloon Detour

By Nancy Holton

“It is through the infinite permutations of human effort that we discover the hidden fissures of compassion,” intoned the podium’s teleprompter, its monotone reverberating through the Cross Civic Center like damp socks against a marble floor.

Marisol pressed her forehead against the rain-spattered window of the rented Ford Transit. “I get all my vegan leather from a Neo-Pentecostal emo fashionista from darkest Duluth,” she declared, voice quivering like a tuning fork in a windstorm. “She’s expanded the range to include faux crocodile in chromatics for the healing benefits. Makes a great table spread for the neuro-spicy species. Capiche, Capuchins?”

GPS Lady responded with a digital sigh: “Recalculating route via existential ennui…” Tanya—Mongolian, though don’t you dare mention it—rolled her eyes so hard they nearly completed a full rotation. “How can I chase you if you don’t stand still!?”

Sidney in the backseat, clutching a sheaf of case notes, interjected methodically, “I gave up goat milk in favor of fat-free sheep milk in a fifty-fifty mix with vodka.” A pause. “Because credentials are overrated.”

“How will we get the doubloons now?” sniffed Larry, adjusting spectacles fogged by the overhead heater. “We were using your beard hair to tie the balloons!”

Above them, the highway shimmered as though they hurtled through some bureaucratic mirage, every rain-blotched mile a question in search of an answer.

“Only when the individual transcends the labyrinth of institutional expectation can true transformation occur,” droned the keynote speaker—an avatar of TED-style certitude—while rows of weary welfare paraprofessionals nodded in synchronized sleep.

That evening, they disembarked before a steakhouse glowing like a mirage. It sat on the far side of the shopping plaza, separated from them by exactly two hundred and seven steps and two cartographers’ quarrels. Google Maps insisted, “Turn left.” GPS Lady insisted, “No, recalculating.” They argued until the neon sign flickered pity at them.

Inside, the menu promised “grass-fed compassion” and “solidarity on the side.” They ordered vegetables—an act of rebellion—and whispered about lost doubloons. The chandelier rattled in sympathy.

“Let us recall that every policy document is but a palimpsest of forgotten promises,” intoned the front-desk clerk at the Quality Inn, whose smile never reached her eyes.

Twenty of them trudged into the lobby, each handed five books of triplicate forms. Pages multiplied like bureaucratic bread rising to a sour, acrid leaven. They signed until their pens clogged with existential ink. The clerk tallied: “Three weeks’ pay deducted per room.” A shriek rose—a minor rebellion fizzing out into the January drizzle.

They dispersed: Suite A swallowed ten souls in two double beds and a wheezing pull-out couch; Suite B crammed the rest around two more doubles and a solitary cot that groaned like a disillusioned harp. The heaters whispered apologies while damp towels glistened under the flickering fluorescent.

“In every breakout session, we confront the dialectic of self-care and system-care,” the workshop leader proclaimed, scribbling on a flipchart that shed its paper like autumn leaves.

They split into cells. Room 1 debated whether “compassion fatigue” could be rebranded as “careful exuberance.” Room 2 attempted charades of ethical dilemmas—none guessed “dual relationships.” In the hall, a once-famous singer shuffled onstage. His 1987 hit crackled through the PA, a ghost of ’80s optimism. He lip-synched with the stoicism of a man reciting tax code, and they cheered out of obligation.

At last, someone suggested the ice rink.

“The race itself is the teacher; every collision, a lesson in interdependence,” an off-the-cuff remark from an unregistered mentor who lurked at the edge of the rink.

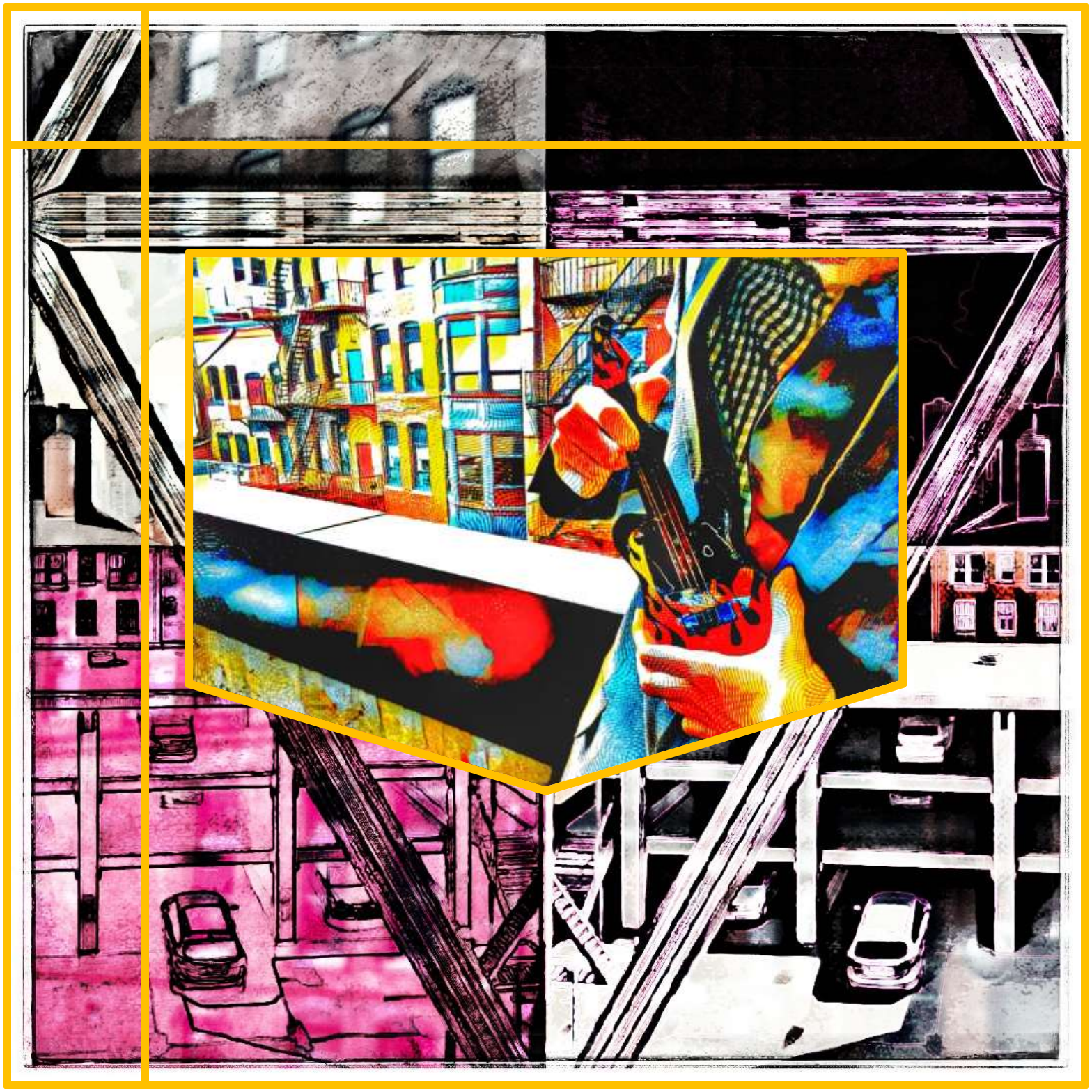
Go-carts squealed across the barriered ice, tires chewing on frost. They crashed into hay bales of inflatable dignity. Laughter ricocheted like stray pucks. The scoreboard, blank as a fresh application form, awarded no winner; fatigue and exhilaration sufficed.

“As we return to our communities, may our spirits bear the imprint of this shared absurdity,” concluded the final facilitator, voice thick with unearned gravitas.

They packed up: soggy notebooks, half-eaten granola bars, pockets of clipped receipts. The van awaited, greased by rain and regret. GPS Lady murmured once more, “Recalculating... gratitude trajectory engaged.”

Tanya finally spoke: “Next year, we carpool by foot.”

Marisol nodded, fingering her faux-crocodile purse. “Capiche, Capuchins?” And in that moment, through the haze of forms, frozen beds, and baffling maxims, they recognized the odd alchemy of shared inconvenience—and found themselves, against all odds, curiously, irreversibly changed.



Když Máj Zreziví: Zpověď Noční Lampy (When the Month of May Rusts: Confessions of a Night Lamp in Daytime from an Inexplicably Czech Perspective)

By Jan Jindřich Bohumil Kohout

The Grand Tour

Night dripped in syrupy rust. On the roof of the Free Street garage—high above the stale breath of Dunkin' exhaust and the river-rush of Commercial Street traffic—orange sodium pooled like a slow hemorrhage, warming nothing, revealing everything:

a lattice of tire ghosts,
kaleidoscopes of oil (flaring sea-green, bruise-violet),
grit so fine you could salt a rim and toast the future with it.
Somewhere under that glow, the air tasted of late-April thaw: salt from Casco Bay, penny-blood from corroded railings, lilac-sweet from a tree you couldn't see but remembered anyway—the way you remember a lost aunt humming hymns while pruning roses in a town that might have been Přerov, might have been Orono.

Still Sits the Schoolhouse by the Road, A Ragged Beggar Sunning

„Byl pozdní večer—první máj…"
Yet May feels shy on this rooftop; it drags its hem through puddles of antifreeze, trying to smell like the beechwoods of Kokořín, but the odor is fried dough and burnt espresso. Down on Congress, the Longfellow House keeps its polite federal symmetry, granite

eyebrows raised at the chaos. Tourists photograph a poet's window while, ten steps away, a man cradles a styrofoam cup—asks of midnight what Mácha asked of the moon: *Budeš mi sluchem? Will you lend me your ear?*
The moon shrugs behind sodium vapor; the house's brass plaque says nothing; only a Dunkin' vent sings, warm and sugary, to those wrapped in blanket cocoons beneath its pink-and-orange glow.

A Picture from Life's Other Side

Jarvis Avewell—creased black suit, shoulders at war with seams—stood like the last punctuation mark in a sentence God abandoned mid-draft.
His voice? A gravel road after rain.
His heart? Half-tin, half-tinder.
He lifted a toy guitar scarred with a thousand jukebox refusals and bent a chord that moaned of distant buses and broken glass. A fragment of song fluttered loose:
"The chrome it gleamed / like a loosened tooth…"
then fell silent again, as if ashamed of its own hunger.

A Conscience Is That Still Small Voice That People Refuse To Listen To

Jarvis's chord dangles over the garage parapet and echoes east, past the Ship Channel, past the tidy condos flowering where bait shacks once rotted. South Portland refashions itself nightly: lobster traps out, artisanal tapas in, rent spiking like a gull after french fries. Mácha would have chronicled the evictions—tenants as exiled lovers, walking the Fore River rail before dawn, muttering verses that no planning board can zone out.

You Never Even Call Me by My Name

Below the false stars, the congregation gathered in shards:

teens slouching against dented sedans, mistaking existential dread for Friday night freedom; silhouettes stretching on fire escapes, half gargoyle, half ballet;
pigeons counting their ribs in the draft. All watched Grover Harlow, captain of a buzzing mobility scooter, foil hat turned north toward threat or salvation. The Blue Fairy—plastic bride, cerulean gaze, still as winter water—kept her own counsel.
In the Multitude of Books Is Wisdom
How strange, thinks the moon (or maybe it's Mácha again, smoke-throated, jealous of every New World skyline) that wooden masts have become condo cranes. The teens below pretend each cloud is a stage light; they don't see the shadows camping outside Dunkin', trading cigarettes for half-melted crullers. The homeless form a silent chorus, as in Máj's final act—souls condemned not for murder but for being inconvenient adjectives in a city's glossy brochure.

He Stopped Loving Her Today

Wind carried the quiet.
Grover's mask inflated, deflated, a bellows for a word that refused birth.
At last it came, ragged as sea-ice breaking:
"Lonely ain't the word—what do you call the space between pulse and echo?"

Nobody answered, though somewhere a gull screamed like feedback.

All Your Dreams Can Come True If You Have the Courage to Pursue Them

Gulls here are less lyrical than Mácha's nightingale, but they know critique: The condos eat the shore. Each new façade rises like a fresh stanza of capitalist iambs, pushing rooming houses toward the water. Beneath the sodium lamps, the space between pulse and echo is filled with realtor slogans: Live Where You Vacation!—a line even Jarvis's guitar refuses to play.

Stand by Your Man

Jarvis, tasting rust on his tongue, inhaled the sky's chemical ache and said,
"Love is nailing Jell-O to fog, brother. Try anyway."

He raised cracked knuckles toward the doll, toward the lamp-lit bruise-sky, toward the unseen gulls skimming darkness. Fragment by fragment, the ceremony fell together:

"Do you, Grover, swear to polish her varnished smile, to guard her plastic soul from stray frequencies, to believe when believing rusts?"

Grover's scooter spun—a delirious, slow-motion pirouette—before he barked through the mask, "I DO, with every lead-lined atom!"

"And you, O blue-painted question mark—do you receive this heart stitched with static?"

The doll shimmered. Silence is sometimes yes, sometimes maybe, always knife-sharp. Jarvis chose yes.

A Lie Has No Legs, It Cannot Stand Alone

Here the Blue Fairy splits like a prism:

Disney's lacquered benevolence, wand pre-approved by merchandisers;
Collodi's original Bambina dai Capelli Turchini—pale, fainting, intermittently dead, a gothic sister to Mácha's Jarmila, whose tears watered an entire lake of grief. Jarvis feels both versions breathing down his collar: corporate sparkle vs. 19th-century doom. He wonders which bride Grover is marrying—mass-produced miracle or azure-haired revenant? The answer is as fog-nailed as love itself.
Ring of Fire
The ring was no ring: a chrome nut scavenged from machines long decommissioned.
It skittered, fugitive, toward a drainage grate—

clang (hope)
clang (fear)

Grover lunged, caught the nickel glint, lifted it like sunrise. For a breath the whole roof inhaled with him, then let go. The nut slid onto stiff vinyl finger. Commitment sealed in recycled metal.
The Best Thing About The Future Is That It Comes One Day At A Time
Commitment—Mácha mutters from his Bohemian grave—always slides toward the grate. Ask Vilém hung on the gallows, ask Jarmila drowning in moon-ink water. Yet even a chrome nut can impersonate eternity if held at the correct angle to lamplight. That paradox tastes of both Prague and Portland: cafés selling nostalgia while boarding up yesterday's diners.

Crazy

Twilight folded into night: bruise-purple, heart-black. Somewhere a radio leaked a steel-guitar lament—lonelier than wolves, sweeter than sleep.
Jarvis pocketed crumpled bills, no ceremony in that. Grover stroked blue plastic hair and, half-singing, half-praying, promised, "They won't reach you. I'll stand by—by—us."

Wheels whirred. Two silhouettes descended the spiral ramp, swallowed by automobile hum and the mineral smell of damp concrete.

The Building Is a Symphony of Stone

South Portland's waterfront glitters with condo vestibules lit like aquariums. Investors sip Prosecco where sardine packers once cursed the tide. The homeless shuffle toward the 24-hour Dunkin', counting stray pennies, chasing the smell of donuts the city calls vagrancy and Mácha would label simply human night-hunger. Meanwhile, Longfellow's house sleeps behind iron fencing, dreaming of a time when rhyme could shelter anyone.

Ghost Riders in the Sky

Left behind:

a doll on a scooter,
a chrome nut glinting like a trapped star,
a roof full of unsettled dust.
Below, the city exhaled petrol dreams.
Above, real stars stayed hidden—shy, ashamed, or merely patient—scribing footnotes nobody will read until the sky cracks open and all the lonely questions finally rhyme.

The Tide Rises, the Tide Falls

Some night, when lilacs riot and gentrification pauses for breath, a volunteer will climb this garage and find her—the cerulean bride, shiny sentinel of unresolved vows. They'll wonder if it's art, protest, or children's prank; the newspapers will flirt with metaphors; City Hall will schedule removal. Yet the doll will echo Mácha's closing chord: Láska je hrob a hrob je láska. Love is a grave and the grave is love.
Still, across the bridge, dunked beneath neon, a man blows on coffee gone cold, and Longfellow's study window glints—briefly—like the chrome nut on her finger. Two poets, two centuries, one city murmuring through its cracked-orange night:

"Let the roof cave in; we are still singing."

The Noose is Loose (and So Are My Extra Appendages): A Germy Germaine Odyssey in Four Movements (and Approximately Thirty-Six Minor Twitches)

BY ANTHONY BLATZ

The year, as they say, was nineteen-eighty-something. Or possibly eighty-plumb-two. My temporal awareness at thirteen (going on twenty-seven point five-ish, given the recent growth spurt) was as reliable as a soothsayer's promise regarding trickle-down economics. I, Jeremy "Germy" Germaine, a callow youth navigating the treacherous shoals of seventh grade at Nathan Bishop Middle School in the erstwhile People's Republic of Providence, Rhode Island, possessed an anatomical configuration that often rendered life... well, let's just say applying the newfangled seat belt laws was less a civic duty and more an exercise in advanced origami with sentient limbs.

MOVEMENT I: THE BELTING HOUR BLUES

The edict had come down from on high, or at least from the Rhode Island General Assembly: Thou Shalt Buckle Up. For the average biped, this presented a minor inconvenience, a momentary fumbling with nylon straps. For me, however, entering the family's wood-paneled station wagon was akin to wrestling a kraken in a phone booth. Twelve arms, each with its own distinct opinion on the matter (three favored a figure-eight around the thorax, four lobbied for a simple drape across the lap, and the remaining five were invariably tangled in my thirty-six legs, which, in their burgeoning adolescence, seemed to have doubled overnight – a fact corroborated by my tailor's increasingly

frantic telegrams), made the process a veritable Gordian knot of limbs and legislation. My two front eyes, naturally focused on the task at hand, frequently crossed in sympathetic bewilderment with my two rear eyes, which were generally more concerned with whether young Kenji "The Viper" Singh in the back seat was attempting to pilfer my Milk Dud stash again.

“Germy, for the love of Roger Williams, just buckle up!” boomed Eduardo “El Fuego” Chen, my father, from the driver’s seat, his face a mask of early-onset parental exasperation. He failed to grasp the inherent complexities of my situation. It wasn’t a matter of mere recalcitrance; it was a topological nightmare. How does one reconcile twelve arms with a single lap belt and a shoulder strap designed for a creature with precisely two clavicles? The answer, I suspected, lay hidden in the dusty archives of a forgotten government subcommittee, probably filed under “Anomalous Appendage Accommodation Act of ‘79.”

MOVEMENT II: THESPIAN TRIBULATIONS AND SUDDEN VERTICALITY

Escape, however temporary, could be found in the hallowed halls of the after-school drama club. There, amidst the discarded set pieces and the faint aroma of theatrical ambition (mixed with the distinct odor of Evangelina "La Tigresa" Dubois’ overly enthusiastic application of stage makeup), I could, for a brief spell, forget the tyranny of the seat belt. Our current production, a daring reimagining of “The Pied Piper of Hamelin” set in a dystopian laundromat, required a certain dramatic flair. My twelve arms, initially a source of social awkwardness, proved surprisingly versatile in portraying a particularly menacing rat chorus.

Then came Tuesday. One minute, I was a mere 4’9”, struggling to reach the top shelf of the prop closet. The next, I was peering down at Evangelina "La Tigresa" Dubois’ rapidly receding hairline from a dizzying height of 7’5.3”. Twenty-four hours. It felt like the world had undergone its own dramatic growth spurt, leaving me a bewildered Gulliver in a land of Lilliputian lockers and undersized water fountains. My voice, which had been a respectable adolescent squeak, now resonated with the gravitas of a foghorn in a biscuit tin. My carefully rehearsed squeaks of rodent fury now sounded more like the mating

calls of a lovesick Sasquatch. The seat belt, previously a challenge, was now a distant, almost mythological concept, like the Abominable Snowman or a balanced school lunch.
Movement III: The Bostonian Brouhaha of Bygone Years

It was during a particularly awkward rehearsal, where I kept knocking over the "Washing Machine of Doom" set piece with my errant elbows, that Seraphina "The Cyclone" Rossi-Khan, my aunt, called. Her voice, usually a cheerful chirrup, was thick with the melancholic syrup of tragedy.

"Germy, dear," she began, and I knew, with the sudden certainty of a method actor realizing he's forgotten his lines, that this was not good news. "Your grandmother... well, she's gone to the great lint trap in the sky."

My grandmother? I had vague recollections of a kindly woman with a penchant for Werther's Originals and a disconcerting ability to knit extra-long socks. "Oh," I managed, my newly baritone voice cracking slightly.

"Yes, dear. It was... well, it was the molasses."

The molasses? My mind, still reeling from the overnight transformation into a towering adolescent, struggled to process this. Was this some sort of bizarre Rhode Island euphemism? Had she slipped in a puddle of spilled Lyle's Golden Syrup?

"The... the disaster, Germy. In Boston. At the turn of the century."

Ah. The Great Molasses Flood of 1919. A historical footnote, a cautionary tale whispered in the hallowed halls of New England lore. A sticky, sweet apocalypse. My grandmother? I suddenly pictured her, not as the kindly sock-knitter, but as a figure caught in a viscous wave of treacle, her final moments a desperate struggle against the relentless, sugary surge. It possessed a certain... tragicomic grandeur. A Hiranandani-esque exploration of familial history intertwined with a distinctly Adaf-ian surrealness.

MOVEMENT IV: EXISTENTIAL ANGST AND THIRTY-SIX PAIRS OF UNTIED SHOELACES

The revelation, coupled with my sudden ascent into the upper atmosphere of middle school height, left me in a state of existential quandary. What was my place in this world, I pondered, as I attempted to navigate the crowded school hallways, my thirty-six legs creating a chaotic ballet of tripping hazards? Was I merely a genetic anomaly, a Perelmanian punchline walking upright (and precariously)? Was my grandmother, Isabella "Sweet Swirl" Rodriguez- Dubois,'s syrupy demise a cosmic joke, a sticky metaphor for the unpredictable nature of existence?

The seat belt laws suddenly seemed a trivial concern. How could one worry about vehicular safety when confronted with the knowledge that one's lineage was irrevocably intertwined with a tidal wave of viscous sweetener?

As I shuffled towards drama class, my twelve arms laden with a newly oversized script for "The Pied Piper of the Slightly Taller Lad," I realized that perhaps the "fusion singularity secret sauce" of life, much like Evangelina "La Tigresa" Dubois' questionable stage makeup, was a bizarre and often bewildering concoction of the mundane and the utterly, gloriously absurd. And somewhere, amidst the tangle of limbs and the lingering scent of molasses, a small, slightly bewildered part of me, a part that still remembered being 4'9", couldn't help but chuckle. Albeit, a chuckle that now sounded suspiciously like a foghorn gargling peanut butter.

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